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FOR THE NORTH-AMERICAN REVIEW.

Letter from H. Oldenburg, Secretary of the Royal Society, to the Hon. John Winthrop Governour of Connecticut.

“London, April 11, 1791.

“SIR,

“Your letter of October 11, 1670, to me, and your present to the Royal Society, together with that to Sir R. Moray, I have well received from the hands of Mr. Fairweather, who deserveth to be commended for his care of the particulars you had entrusted him with. I soon delivered to the said society their parcell, viz. the shell-fish (called Horse-foot) the Humming-bird's nest with the two eggs in it, being yet whole, the feathered fly, and the shells, bullets and clays taken out of the overturned hill: for all which, that noble company returns you their hearty thanks, and very much desires the continuance of such curious communications, for the enlargement of their repository, and consequently of the intended history of nature. These curiosities being viewed at one of our publick meetings, some of the company conceived that what you call the sharp tail of the Horse-foot, is rather the fore-part and nose of the fish; the same persons having also found that two of the knobbs on the shell, now dried up, had been the places of the eyes, and did still by the manner of their ductuss express, that they had looked towards the said nose, when the animal was alive. The Humming bird's nest was also shewed to his Majesty, who was as much pleased with it as the Society, and I doubt not but Sir Rob. Moray will tell you the same, and withal acknowledge the receipt of those silk pods that were directed to him.

“Concerning the overturned Hill, it is wished that a more certain and punctual relation might be procured of all the circumstances of that accident. It seems strange, that no earthquake was perceived, and yet that the Hill is said to have been carried over the tops of the Trees into the River, as also that people being near it should not certainly know the day when this happened. I doubt not, Sir, but your own curiosity will have carried you since you wrote this, to view the place, and to examine all the particulars remarkable in this matter. I hope my Lord Brereton, to whom

you communicated the story at length, will also write to you by this return, and join with me in the request of giving us a fuller account of this wonder.

"I cannot yet desist from recommending to you the composition of a good history of New-England, from the beginning of the English arrival there, to this very time; containing the Geography, Natural Productions and civil administration thereof, together with the notable progress of the plantation and the remarkable occurrences in the same; an undertaking worthy of Mr. Winthrop, and a member of the Royal Society!

"A herewith send you a few philosophical Books lately printed here, viz.

"1. Mr. Boyle's new tracts about the wonderful rarefaction and condensation of the air, &c.

"2. Monsieur Charas'* new experiments upon vipers.

"3. The transactions of 1670.

"To these I add a small discourse, originally written in French, against that great Sorbonist Mons. Arnaud, touching the perpetuity of the Romish faith about the Eucharist, and so wishing you much health and happiness,

I remain sir,

Your faithful servant,

HENRY OLDENBURG."

"Sir,

"When you send any thing more for the R. Society, or for me, I pray, add my dwelling place, (in the Pal-Mal) to the superscription. I must not forget to give you very many thanks for the Cranberries; they tasted of the cask, or else they would have been very good."

* Vid. Rees' Cyclop. Art. *Charas*. That account is silent as to the cause of his confinement in the Spanish Inquisition, which we learn from other sources, and it is not an uninteresting article in literary history. It was believed in Spain, when *Charas* was in that country, that Vipers within twenty leagues of Toledo were not venomous, it having pleased a holy Archbishop to deprive them of their poison. *Charas* cautioned the people in that vicinity not to trust to this persuasion. The physicians of the Court, who were hurt at his being invited to prescribe to the king, denounced him for his rash suggestions relative to the disvenomed vipers. The Spanish zealots were offended that he had disturbed a belief which they had found useful to maintain, and *Charas* was imprisoned for his temerity. After seventeen years confinement, he obtained his discharge, at the age of seventy-two, by adjuring the protestant religion which he had professed.—*Ency. Method Nouv. Dict. Hist.*

“P. S. I just now received Sir R. Moray’s letter, as you find it here unsealed. My Lord Brereton hath not yet sent his, and I dare stay no longer from doing up this packet, the master of the ship having appointed this morning for the delivering of it.

To his honoured friend, John
Winthrop, Governour of
Connecticut in N. England.”

MR. EDITOR,

Mr. Oldenburg’s letter, of which I have transmitted to you a copy, has been several years in my possession. It will be deposited in the Archives of the Massachusetts Historical Society. We may smile at the mistaken conjecture of the assembled naturalists relative to the “fore-part and nose” of the *Horse-foot*; but, it should be recollected, that this animal is not an inhabitant of the European coasts. It is found only in this country and in India. Perhaps, also, the observers were misled by the description of the animal given by *Clusius*, who made the same mistake. In his *Exotica*, published at Antwerp, in 1605, p. 128, that eminent naturalist gives a description and a representation of the *Cancer Moluccanus*, [*Monoculus Polyphemus*. Linn.] the shell of which he had seen at Leyden in 1603, and with which our *Horse-foot* very nearly corresponds. The manner in which the figure is placed would indicate that he considered the thorn-like process, with which the animal is furnished, to be the fore part; but his description more decidedly manifests his mistake. “Anterior porro testæ pars aculeum habebat—septem uncias longum, angustum et mucronatum.”

In regard to the *overturned hill*, though some curiosity was excited by Mr. Oldenburg’s letter, no intimation would be found in any of our publications, excepting, the following article in *Josselyn’s voyages to New-England*, which it was supposed had reference to the occurrence communicated by Mr. Winthrop, 1670, “at a place called *Kennebunck*, which is in the Province of Main, not far from the river-side, a piece of clay ground was thrown up by a mineral vapour (as was supposed) over the tops of high oaks that grew between it and the river, into the river, stopping the course thereof, and tearing a hole forty yards square, wherein were thousands of clay bullets, and pieces

of clay in shape like the barrel of a musket. The like accident fell out at Casco, one and twenty miles from it, to the eastward, much about the same time; and fish in some ponds in the country thrown up dead upon the banks, supposed likewise to be killed with mineral vapours." In Hubbard's History of New-England, recently published by the Massachusetts Historical Society, we find a confirmation of the account given by Josselyn. In the 75th chapter of his valuable work, the venerable author observes, "Divers reports have passed up and down the country, of several ominous accidents happening within the fore-mentioned time, [from 1666 to 1682] as of earthquakes in some places, and of several vollies of shot heard in the air in the year 1667, but, because many that lived not far off those places, where the said accidents were supposed to fall out, knew nothing thereof, no more notice shall here be taken of the same, than a bare hint of the report; but at a place called Kennebunk, at the north-east side of Wells, in the Province of Maine, not far from the river-side, a piece of clay ground was thrown up by a mineral vapour, (as is supposed) over the tops of high oaks that grew between it and the river. The said ground so thrown up, fell in the channel of the river, stopping the course thereof, and tearing an hole forty yards square in the place whence it was thrown, in which were found thousands of round pellets of clay, like musket bullets. All the whole town of Wells are witnesses of the truth of this relation; and many others have seen sundry of these clay pellets, which the inhabitants have shewn to their neighbours of other towns. This accident fell out in the year 1670."

From the literal coincidence of expression between these two writers, in a considerable portion of these paragraphs, we must suppose that Hubbard had seen Josselyn's book, which was published in 1674; though he does not refer to him. It is evident however, that he writes from his own conviction, and he confidently vouches the inhabitants of Wells, for the truth of his narrative. He omits to notice a like incident at Casco, which is asserted by Josselyn. Josselyn was in this country in 1670, and resided at Black-point, (Scarborough,) but a few miles from the Kennebunk. This evidence would authorize us to conclude, with every reasonable allowance for probable exaggerations, that some violent disruption or mutation at

that time took place on the banks of the Kennebunk, though no tradition of the occurrence should have been preserved.

Both Hubbard and Josselyn suggest the operation of "*a mineral vapour*" to account for the phenomenon which they relate, corresponding with one of the many hypotheses that have been proposed, in explanation of earthquakes. Josselyn, evidently imagined, that this influence was widely extended, and that the fish thrown up dead from some ponds in the country, which he does not name, were killed by like *mineral vapours*. In the same connexion he adds the following passage; "a wonderful number of herrings, cast up on shore at high water, in *Black point harbour*, in the province of Maine, so that they might have gone half way the leg in them for a mile together." In regard to a peculiar affection of certain ponds at that time, Hubbard has the following remark. "Others have confidently reported also, that they have seen the eruption of a pond of water far up into the woods, and many fish cast up upon the dry land adjoining, supposed to be done by the kindling of some mineral vapours, under those hollow channels, running far within the land under ground."—[History of N. England, 607.]

He afterwards [p. 648,] relates the following fact, "Some time in *June* 1676, it was observed, that at a great pond in Watertown, all the fish there (many cart loads as was thought) swam to the shore and died. It was conceived to be the effect of some minerall vapour, that at that time had made an irruption into the water."

In a letter from the Rev. John Eliot, to the Honourable Robert Boyle, dated, September 30, 1670, there is the following passage; "there hath been a rare work of God, this summer, in a great pond at Watertown, where all the fish died, and were not willing to die in the waters; but, as many as could, thrust themselves on shore, and there died; not less than twenty cart load, by estimation, lying dead, all at once, round about the pond. An eel was found alive in the sandy border of the pond, and being cast into the water, she wriggled out again, as fast as she could, and died on the shore. An inhabitant of the town, living by the pond, his cattle use daily to drink there, but then, for three days together, they refused there to drink, but after three days they drank of the pond, as they were wont to do. When the fish began to come ashore, before they died, many were taken and eaten both by English and Indians with-

out any hurt, and the fish were very good.”—[Hist. Coll. III. 177.] Upon a comparison of these two accounts, it was conjectured that the same occurrence was intended by both these writers, and that in one of them there was an error in the date. Mr. Eliot’s date was believed to be correct, and it has been found, on examination, obligingly made by James Savage, Esq. Librarian of the Massachusetts Historical Society, that the manuscript copy of Hubbard’s History, in fact, corresponds with Mr. Eliot’s account, as to time, and that the insertion of 1676, in the printed copy, is a typographical error. “The MS. of Hubbard,” says Mr. Savage, “that is in our archives, has the year quite plain 1670, not 1676, although a printer might be not wholly without excuse, who should express the latter.”* This concurrent testimony in regard to the occurrence at Watertown, about the time when the phenomenon at Kennebunk is said to have happened, tends to confirm the additional circumstances which are mentioned by Josselyn alone. We are not able to determine from these accounts, whether the destruction of the fish, in ponds and on the sea-coast, were precisely contemporaneous with the displacement of the hill at Kennebunk. If that were the case, we might infer, that all the phenomena were produced by the action of some powerful and deleterious gas, though we might be unable, satisfactorily, to explain the manner of its production. It was not here intended, however, to attempt an explanation of the phenomena, which have been related, but to state the evidence which we have on the subject, as to the reality of their existence, and to trace the connexion, whatever it may have been, between the different appearances.

We do not find that Mr. Winthrop pursued the inquiry by personal resort to the spot, or otherwise, as recommended

* The printing of Hubbard’s History, the publication of which had been so long desired, was under the superintendence of a committee of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the community is much indebted to them for their assiduity and care, in the execution of their commission. The printers, also, are to be commended, for the neatness and accuracy of the impression. The general correctness of the edition is unquestionable, though from the condition of the manuscript and the antiquated chirography, there were many difficulties to encounter. The error, which it became necessary to notice in this place, arose from the connexion of the cypher with the stem of a letter in the preceding line.

by Mr. Oldenburg. He died at Boston, April 5, 1676. His multiplied engagements, in civil and political life, might have prevented any further attention to the subject, or he might have prosecuted inquiries of which the traces are lost. It was specially desirable to see his letter to Lord Brereton to which Mr. Oldenburg refers, and it was gratifying to find it preserved in Birch's History of the Royal Society. A mere extract, or summary of this letter would, probably, not be satisfactory to many of your readers ; it is therefore presented entire.

“ Boston, Oct. 11, 1670.

“ MY LORD,

“ The relation which I am now presenting to your Lordship, is of a very strange and prodigious wonder, this last summer, in this part of the world ; that the like hath not been known for the whole manner of it, I do not remember that I have read or heard. There was a hill near Kennebunk river, in the province of Maine, the eastern part of New-England, which is removed out of its place, and the bottom turned upwards. The time is not certain when it was done, but that it is so is very certain, and it is concluded by those who live nearest to it, that it was removed either the latter end of June, or the beginning of July last. The relation, I have from creditable persons respecting it, is this, viz. that the hill being almost eight rods from Kennebunk river side, on the west side of the river, about four miles from the sea, was removed from its place, over the dry land, about eight rods or perches, and over the tops of the trees also, between the hill and the river, leaping, as it were, over them into the river, where it was placed, the upper part being downward, and dammed up the river, till the water did work itself a passage through it. The length of the hill was two hundred and fifty feet, the breadth almost eighty, and the depth of it almost twenty feet. The situation of the place, as to the length of it, was N. W. to S. E. The earth of it is a blue clay, without stones ; many round bullets were within it, which seem to be of the same clay hardened. I have not seen the place myself, but sent purposely to inquire into the truth of what had been reported concerning it. I had this relation from Major William Phillips, who dwelleth not far from the place, and Mr. Harlekendon Symons, who went to the place and took very good notice, and brought me the same report of the truth and

manner of it, which I had before received by a letter from Major Phillips, in answer to my letter of inquiry, and told that the earth of the hill did not lie between the former place of the hill and the river, which seems to be, as it were, blown up by such force, as carried the whole body of it so far together. I had from them some few of those round bullets, which were found upon that now upper part, which before was the lower or inner bowels of the hill, as also a small shell or two, of a kind of shell fish, like some shell fish commonly found where the sea flows, but how they should be within the hill is strange to consider. I have sent all that I had from thence, to the Royal Society, for their repository. I understand also from those parts, that there was no notice taken of an earthquake about that time, nor did I hear of any in any other parts of the country. I give your Lordship only a relation of this prodigy as I had it upon the best inquiry I could make, leaving the discussion of the natural causes which might concern a matter too hard for me to comprehend; but the power of his almighty arm is manifest to all, who weigheth the hills in a balance, and in whose presence the heavens drop, the hills are melted like wax; Sinai itself is moved.

“I hope to have an opportunity to see the place, and if any other matter considerable, upon my observations, or further inquiry shall appear, I shall be obliged to give your Lordship a further account thereof, and for the present, am bold only to subscribe myself,

Your right honourable Lordship's
humble servant,

JOHN WINTHROP.”

“*To the Lord Brereton.*”

It is proper to add, that inquiry has been made of intelligent individuals in Wells, by a gentleman who has recently journeyed to that part of the country, and that no tradition of such an occurrence, as is above described, is preserved in that region. One of the persons consulted, observed, that there had been four or five instances within his recollection, (one about thirty years since) when a large mass of earth containing several trees, slid into the river, and for a time formed a great obstruction, to the current. Similar landslips are not unfrequent in this and other countries. There was one a few years since on the Kennebeck, between Hallowell and Augusta, which is thus described by the friend who

made the inquiries at Wells. "A mass of earth with several trees on its surface was carried about sixteen rods ; the force with which it went, bore down large trees which it passed over." "It was in this way probably" he adds, "on the Kennebunk in the occurrence which gave rise to Mr. Winthrop's letter. The people in the neighbourhood supposed it must have been *blown up*, though the trees might have righted after its passage. In the instance on the Kennebeck, the land was undermined by springs, and being on a declivity, slid off by its own weight from the hard clay beneath."

It is obvious, that in adopting this explanation, we must reject some particulars asserted in the narrative ; but such a process often occurs in forming results upon evidence. Further inquiry may lead to the substitution of some other solution. In the mean time we may remark, that the apparently strange relations which we often meet with in history should not be too hastily rejected, as fabrications or illusions. A just interpretation often leads to satisfactory conclusions from statements which appear wild and extravagant. Our acquaintance with electricity, explains some of the marvellous phenomena asserted by Pliny, and what is known of the aurora borealis, and of the zodiacal light, informs us what we are to understand by the flaming spears and aerial armies, which were beheld and recorded by our terrified ancestors.

September 12.

D.